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STYLE AND LITERATURE

William Watson, the poet, has said very happily that "style is the great antiseptic in literature"—that only by virtue of its style can literature endure. But may one not go further and say that style is the very condition of literature, that literature without style is not literature at all, that the phrase is a contradiction in terms? Is it not precisely in style that we find that which distinguishes literature from what is not literature?

A famous definition of style is that by Swift. "Proper words in proper places," says Swift, "make the true definition of style." This is utterly unsatisfying. To tell a man to put proper words in the proper places is just about as valuable a precept as to tell him to distribute his ink properly over the paper, or to tell the maker of a steam-engine to combine metals of the proper shape in the proper way. Swift's definition is utterly sterile and impotent to quicken thought into any fruitful life. Far otherwise with the renowned maxim of Buffon: "Le style est de l'homme même," "The style comes from the man himself," not, as it is universally misquoted: "Le style est l'homme même," "The style is the man himself." Unlike Swift's definition, this saying makes for the heart of the matter, and if one can succeed in exposing fully to view what is wrapped up in this capital maxim of Buffon, we shall be well on the way to a right understanding of the true significance of style. But before proceeding to details it is well to remove a possible misapprehension of the definition and to answer a probable objection that may be urged.

The possibility of misapprehension is mainly due to the general misquotation which I have just mentioned, though it is also due to a very common loose usage of the word style. If Buffon had said, style is the man himself, he might very naturally have been understood to mean that whenever a man reveals in words the kind of man he really is, then he has spoken or written style. And that is just the understanding that would be countenanced by the common loose usage of the word, for we commonly say that a man's style is his way of expressing himself. If we were to alter this by stressing the last word, and say, a man's style is his way of expressing *himself*, then we should have the wrong interpretation of Buffon's maxim, which I am, perhaps unnecessarily, trying to guard against. And a wrong interpretation it is, for style is no more a man's way of expressing himself than manners are a man's way of behaving himself. It is true that the word manners is also used thus loosely. Thus we might, speaking loosely, say that Lord Chesterfield, Senator Tillman, and Fuzzy Wuzzy all had manners; that is to say, each has a pretty well-defined way of behaving himself. But we all realize that, in the proper sense of the word, Fuzzy Wuzzy has no manners. And in the same way I should deny that a freshman's composition, even though it revealed pretty faithfully the freshman behind it, had style. Let me insist, therefore, on the true reading of Buffon's maxim: the style comes *from* the man himself. That does not mean that a man's revelation of himself in spoken or written words is in itself style, but that such a revelation is a requisite of style. Whether the product is style or not depends, as we shall presently see, on the quality of the self that is revealed and the ability of the writer to reveal that self in an adequate way.

Now that I have removed, as I hope, any misunderstanding of our fundamental maxim, I wish to clear the ground further by stating and replying to an objection which is sure to rise in any mind that reflects a little on what that maxim signifies. On such reflection the question will almost certainly rise, *Does* style always come from the man himself? Is it not frequently the very cunning of style to conceal the man's real self? What of Talleyrand and his paradox that "language is the art of con-

cealing thought?" And, even if there is no purpose of dissimulation, but on the contrary the utmost effort to put oneself into what one writes, does not Tennyson tell us that

Words, like Nature, half-reveal
And half conceal the soul within?

Now, as regards Tennyson's beautiful words, I cannot reply to them for the simple reason that, though I have hitherto imagined they contained a deep meaning, I find on a closer examination that they mean to me absolutely nothing. I can see that words may only half reveal the soul within, but that they half conceal it, except in the sense that they only half reveal it, I do not see. In the case of deliberate dissimulation, or suppression, however, I deny that artistic language used for that end conceals the personality of the artist. On the contrary, it reveals his personality. It may indeed admirably conceal his personal opinion or his personal intention, but just so far as the language has style it exhibits his personality. It exhibits the individual quality of his mind, and what is the individual quality of his mind but his personality? The case of Shakespeare is one in point. Critics are never tired of pointing out that of the personal opinions of Shakespeare we know almost nothing. His reserve is as mighty as his art. But of the quality of Shakespeare's mind we are in a position to form a very definite judgment. If this be granted, we are now in a position to accept Buffon's maxim and to see it with this additional light: when he says that "style comes from the man himself," he does not mean that the man reveals in his style his entire self, but that the style reveals some essential quality of himself. Perhaps the more accurate translation of the sentence would be: "The style of the man himself."

And now this much seems clear as to the fundamental requirements of language that can be called style: that it must reveal in some way the personality of the writer, and that the personality thus revealed must be of a certain specific worth. If a writer would have style he must have a personal something worth revealing and he must compel language to reveal it. Now this means more than it might seem to mean. I get from it four important propositions;

1. The writer must have a sure recognition of what in his personal inner experience has real value.
2. He must throughout the process of composition preserve this personal something in its integrity.
3. He must make himself an expert in the use of language.
4. He must be steeled to resist the temptations to which an expert in language is exposed.

"Any transgression of, or want of conformity to" these four laws is stylistic sin. And I may add that any writer who says that he is without stylistic sin deceiveth himself and the truth is not in him. Like other standards of righteousness, this standard of style can be approximated only.

1. The writer must have a sure recognition of what in his inner personal experience has a real value. I wish I had a neat word for inner personal experience, but I cannot find one. I mean a state of consciousness in which opportunity is given for the free play of all a person's capacities. And what is most important for our purpose here is to distinguish this state of consciousness from a self-compelled state of consciousness—the state of mind when we surrender ourselves from the state of mind when we discipline ourselves. The distinction is of first importance, for just as an absolute self-surrender is required to receive the free grace of God, so is an absolute self-surrender required to secure that deeply personal consciousness which is the initial impulse of any truly literary work. This self-surrender—to outward impressions and to the visitations from the deeps within—is the very condition of maintaining one's personality. "To be yourself," said a quaint philosopher, "you must let yourself be." That is, you must not restrict yourself, must not tamper with yourself. Here we have the essential difference between literature and science. Just as the initial condition of literature is self-surrender, the initial condition of science is self-restriction. A science must needs deal with a state of consciousness forced into limits; literature with a state of consciousness left in its integrity. Science generalizes: literature individualizes. Science is impersonal: literature, personal. The essential difference between faith and reason is the same. Apply

the scientific method to Christianity and you narrow the force of its appeal. Give a course in Christian evidence to a young man who really knows how to think scientifically and you help to make him a skeptic. And that is not the fault of Christianity. There is nothing like the method of Christian evidences in the Gospels. A man becomes a Christian only by an inner personal experience.

In support of what I have said, I may recall how notorious it is that almost all great literary men have been in their youth impatient of the intellectual discipline of the schools. Among this guild of men college degrees are very scarce. Now I take this to mean simply that, recognizing the value of what they found in themselves, they instinctively refused to let it be tampered with. They were compelled by their natures to keep their personalities intact. Not that they had no discipline. Without discipline they would never have become great artists. But their discipline was self-imposed by their necessity of getting themselves into words. To master the language they wrote in, years of arduous discipline were necessary. Louis Stevenson's charming essay called "An Apology for Idlers" contains the best justification I know of the refusal of a young man to put his neck under the yoke of the routine of the schools. He was himself an incorrigible idler in his Edinburgh days, and he never regretted it. For him idling was a virtue. I suppose that most college students would be very ready to put into practice what I seem to advise. By all means. If you have a sure recognition of the high value of your inner personal experiences, that is if you feel yourself to be a literary genius, never mind your mathematics, but devote yourself, like Stevenson, to English composition.

For my first proposition as to the requisites of style is that the writer must have a sure recognition of what in his personal inner experience has real value. I have excluded all scientific thought as not being really personal. Perhaps I should add, however, there may be along with scientific thought an emotion that is personal. But unless this personal element is present in the language in which the scientific thought is couched, there will be no style. For example, I suppose it is likely enough that

when it flashed upon Herbert Spencer that evolution is "an integration of matter and a concomitant dissipation of motion, during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity" (words that would make Quintillian stare and gasp), he felt a gust of what is called "cosmic emotion." But in this definition, which is doubtless the ideal of scientific language, the personal emotion is pretty well evaporated. Style, I take it, is in science a great vice.

But there may be experience which is genuinely personal and which yet has no value as an initial impulse toward literature. The writer must know how to reject such experience as material to develop. I do not believe that a man naturally runs any great risk here. An inner personal experience of real worth brings with it as ample guarantee a feeling of exquisite joy. But a man who has acquired the habit of writing, or who has to write, is apt to acquire too great a respect for himself and to take everything in himself too seriously.

This was just the trouble with Wordsworth. The verses of William Wordsworth, the poet, have style; but those of "Old Daddy Wordsworth" (as Fitzgerald affectionately terms him) are such that they had better never have been written. Wordsworth lost at times his ability to recognize values; and this in a poet who was at times supremely great is a distressing example of taking all one's thoughts with equal seriousness.

I have said that the warrant of the worth of an inner personal experience is to be found in the feeling of great joy that it brings. That is what is given to the author by the grace of God, but the gift in itself does not make him one of the chosen. We all, I think, have some moments of this kind, moments in which we feel within us, germs of poems, of dramas, of essays of real charm. But this does not mean, alas, that we are of the chosen. The literature in us is of the potential, not of the actual. This whole matter of the initial conception and the relation of this conception to the final product is so admirably and charmingly stated by Dr. Holmes in the "Autocrat" that I must quote the passage in full:

"A lyric conception — my friend, the poet, said — hits me like

a bullet in the forehead. I have often had the blood drop from my cheeks when it struck, and felt that I turned as white as death. Then comes a creeping as of centipedes running down the spine—then a gasp and a great jump of the heart—then a sudden flush, a beating in the vessels of the head—then a long sigh—and the poem is written.

“I said written, but I did not say copied. Every such poem has a soul and a body, and it is the body of it, or the copy, that men read and publishers pay for. The soul of it is born in an instant in the poet’s soul. It comes to him a thought tangled in the meshes of a few sweet words—words that have loved each other from the cradle of the language, but have never been wedded until now. Whether it will ever fully embody itself in a bridal train of a dozen stanzas or not is uncertain, but it exists potentially from the instant that the poet turns pale with it.”

And this applies not only to the genesis of a lyric poem, but to the genesis of any work of true literature.

2. My second proposition is that the writer must, throughout the process of composition, preserve the personal something in its integrity. Now it may seem, at first glance, to be no very difficult matter to hold fast to what has once been conceived in the mind, but anyone with a conscience who has attempted to preserve a conception in its integrity throughout the process of composition knows well that it is one of the hardest things in the world to do. I say anyone with a conscience. There are thousands of people who write and talk from the platform who have no conscience whatever, and it must be said that the reading and lecture-going public do not demand a conscience. They are content with a patchwork of platitudes. But a platitude is a statement in which the individual or personal element is absent, and a patchwork is a succession of statements in which the original single conception fails to be steadily maintained. Even in science this conscientious holding fast to the main idea is an arduous task. But in literature it is ten-fold more so. In science it is possible to construct a logical scheme for the exposition or argument, and a constant regard for the prearranged scheme will prevent the writer from going astray. This process

is like the construction of a machine from a mechanical drawing. But literary architecture is a far more subtle thing than scientific mechanism. As in any genuine architecture, there must be a fundamental unity of conception, and this single conception must pervade every part. "In literary as in all other art," says Walter Pater, "structure is all important. The writer must have that architectural conception of work which foresees the end in the beginning and never loses sight of it, and in every part is conscious of all the rest, till the last sentence does but, with undiminished vigor, unfold and justify the first." For such work no rules are possible, though the existence of many literary patterns are of course of great aid. There is, for example, ready for the artist who has studied the short story, a certain type of structure which projects him some distance along his way. But for all that, he must devise his own individual method of development.

The artist, then, must see to it that his original conception never lapses. Now among the chief dangers that beset his way is the danger of the lapse from the individual into the general. It is a peril of a specially insidious kind and may impose upon the artist in the guise of pure truth. There is no more trying experience than to have a deep personal conviction, which you have been laboring to express, translated for you by some matter-of-fact or narrowly scientific mind into the most humiliating platitude. Style is so and so, the devotee of literature toils and sweats to say. "Do you not simply mean," coldly remarks the matter-of-fact gentleman, "that a writer must have something to say, and say it?" And at first he is almost cajoled into admitting that after all that is just what he does mean. But no! By all that is sacred, he does not mean that. It would be capital treason to admit that he means that. He has failed to convey well just what he does mean, because he is no artist, but he means something which is vastly more particular, and it is in this particular something that the whole significance lies.

Just here lies the fallacy of Pope's much quoted lines in which he tells us that the artist gives to us

"What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed,"

and of the assertion that "Raphael was not the first to conceive the Madonna in his picture; he was the first to express it." I emphatically deny these statements. What oft was thought is a generality; what is so well expressed is a particular possession of the artist, and, until he expresses it, a possession of him alone. That special conception of Raphael was his own special conception, and is as truly Raphael's—more truly Raphael's—than is his technique. And my point is that the preservation of this special conception of his own—the safeguarding of it from a metamorphosis into a general conception common to many—is one of the most difficult, but one of the most necessary, requirements of the artist.

3. So far I have been speaking of the requirements of the writer before he comes properly to the medium, that is to the language, in which his conceptions are to be incarnated. It is perfectly true that words must be present to the writer's mind at the very moment of the initial impulse, and that they are more and more present from that moment up to the time when he definitely sets himself down to compose. But, putting this aside, we come now to my third proposition, as to what is necessary for the attainment of a style. The writer must make himself an expert in the use of language. I once heard a writer of subscription books say that "when a man had really something to say that was worth saying, the thought would clothe itself in language as naturally and as perfectly as the tree grows from the soil." Why was it that this saying met with rather a cordial reception from the audience to whom he was speaking? Why is it that some may feel that the statement is at least plausible? I think that it is because, in the first place, we like to think of a great author's gift for noble language as something divine, as not only an inspiration in spirit, but as a verbal inspiration; and, secondly, because we know pretty well that sometimes a poet, for example, does write a great poem without hesitation. The "Break, Break, Break," Tennyson says, simply "came to him," and he wrote it down. It is only the last consideration that deserves serious attention. In those very rare instances in which a bit of real literature seems to be improvised, it is probably not

really improvised at all. During the period of incubation, though the author may not have been consciously seeking for words, he was probably doing so unconsciously, and what comes to him apparently as a thought in its complete incarnation has, in all likelihood, been gradually evolved by himself in essentially the same way that he evolves things in the ordinary course of his work. This at all events, is the opinion of a number of authors who have discussed the matter, and the point is maintained with great convincingness in Stevenson's essay on Thoreau.

But even if we were to grant something like improvisation on the part of an author at certain rare moments, no one is likely to deny that the words come to him only by virtue of a long and hard previous training in the use of language. He must acquire expertness in the use of his instrument, and what needs emphasis is, that he must study the instrument in a thorough, in a scholarly way. He must acquire the keenest sort of sense for the finer usages of words, their denotation and their connotation; that is, he must be able to use them both with scientific exactness, when occasion requires, and with fruitful suggestiveness, as is more often demanded of the artist. I do not mean by this a philological knowledge, though a philological knowledge of words, which is a knowledge of their original import and their subsequent history, is of real value to the artist: witness De-Quincey's fine effects in restoring to a word its lost significance. But I mean a live sense of the meanings of words as employed by past masters and likewise in current usage. I say that this knowledge must be scholarly. If it is not scholarly, if the writer is deficient in exact knowledge of the capacities of words, he will not be able to make his instrument do his work in any truly adequate way. He will be diffuse, sloppy, commonplace; he will, in other words, fail to get his own particular conception embodied at all. In these days, when so much of our literature springs from journalism, such a scholarly training is particularly needed. In much of the so-called literature that is popular, the English language is treated with shocking irreverence. And by that I do not mean mistakes in grammar or positive misuse of words, but that there is a shocking failure to

bring out the capacities of words. A musician who has no notion of the capacities of the violin on which he is playing, is treating the violin with irreverence in as real a sense as if he were sounding discord on it. This danger is particularly great just now. It is growing. In the eighteenth century the language was uniformly treated with far more respect.

That all writers of great worth have submitted themselves to a rigid training in the use of the instrument it is not hard to prove. We all know from the memoir of Tennyson what a deeply conscientious student he was of the minuter effects of words. I think it was some fourteen re-writings that he gave to the "Splendor falls on castle walls." And to give a more direct testimony, I may be permitted to quote once more a now somewhat hackneyed passage from Robert Louis Stevenson :

"All through my boyhood and youth I was known and pointed out for the pattern of an idler; and yet I was always busy on my own private end, which was to learn to write. I kept always two books in my pocket, one to read, one to write in. As I walked my mind was busy fitting what I saw with appropriate words; when I sat by the roadside I would either read, or a pencil and a penny version-book would be in my hand, to note down the features of the scene or commemorate some halting stanzas. Thus I lived with words. And what I thus wrote was for no ulterior use, it was written consciously for practice. It was not so much that I wished to be an author (although I wished that too) as that I vowed that I would learn to write. That was a proficiency that tempted me; and I practiced to acquire it. . . . Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful, and I knew it; and tried again, and was again unsuccessful, and was always unsuccessful; but at least in these vain bouts, I got some practice in rhythm, and harmony, in construction and the coördination of parts.

"That, like it or not, is the way to learn to write; whether I have profited or not, that is the way. It was so Keats learned

and there was never a finer temperament for literature than Keats's; it was so, if we could trace it out, that all men have learned. . . . Burns is the very type of a prime force in letters; he was of all men the most imitative. Shakespeare himself, the imperial, proceeds directly from a school. It is only from a school that we can expect to have good writers; it is almost invariably from a school that great writers, these lawless exceptions, issue. Now is there anything here that should astonish the considerate? Before he can tell what cadences he truly prefers, the student should have tried all that are possible; before he can choose and preserve a fitting key of words, he should long have practiced the literary scale: and it is only after years of such gymnastic that he can sit down at last, legions of words swarming to his call, dozens of turns of phrase simultaneously bidding for his choice, and he himself knowing what he wants to do and (within the narrow limit of a man's ability) able to do it."

From this we see very clearly that, however much of an idler Stevenson may have been in the eyes of his parents and of the world, he was in reality submitting himself to the hardest kind of discipline.

I have lately been very much interested in a study of the early work of another English author who has since attained considerable reputation and a certain popularity. He has, so far as I know, never spoken directly of his own methods, and he is regarded so little as essentially a stylist that I have rarely seen the term style mentioned in connection with his name. But in his early work the young man is all stylist, that is in the narrower sense of the word, meaning one who is practicing exercises in expression. He has nothing very particular to say, is joyfully innocent of a message to the world, or any burden of the mystery of things. His sole delight in composing is the delight in learning to tame the medium of words. Every conceivable trick of language the energetic youth attempts to perform, and in most cases succeeds with remarkable brilliancy. Watching eagerly the linguistic performances of the writers most in vogue, he tries his hand at them all, and in most cases manages to surpass the others. Much of this is very fantastic,

very artificial, very far-fetched; some of it very much out of taste, a candid mind must admit. He loves to "torture one poor word ten thousand ways," to follow meanings and the shadows of meanings into the most remote recesses, to heap up antitheses and curious balances of phrase, to pursue figures of speech into regions where to interpret them is like interpreting the square root of minus 10. He has written a series of sonnets, of which many are exercises of this sort. And in this way he is becoming a powerful tamer of words, an expert in the use of language. And I know of no contemporary author who is so great an expert. Much of his power is due to his innate genius, but much is also due to the extent and thoroughness of this early apprenticeship. I am speaking, not of Mr. Rudyard Kipling, but of Mr. William Shakespeare.

Mr. Kipling, however, had a similar apprenticeship, in that he, too, was a student of minute effects. Recall the incident in *Stalky & Co.*, in which Beetle, who represents the young Kipling, is deeply chagrined because he remembered too late a telling single word to put in an article for the school paper. Recall also how Sentimental Tommy failed to win the prize for a composition because he could not help waiting an hour for the only right word. It is needless to say that Sentimental Tommy is Mr. Barrie himself. But it is not necessary to give further evidence. The person who imagines that if he has something to say, the right words will come, whether he has had training or not, is in hopeless ignorance of the fundamentals of composition.

4, My fourth proposition will not need much development, and it is indeed perhaps implied in the others. The writer must be steeled to resist the temptations of an expert in language. Now I am not speaking of the "gift of the gab." The man who has the "gift of the gab" is in no sense really an expert in words. The ability to remember readily a certain number of words of three or four syllables and a certain number of stereotyped phrases is anything but real mastery over language. It is rather slavery to language. The willingness to use words as such a man uses them is evidence of a profound ignorance of the value of words. The gift of the gab I admire like any other

charlatanism—for its power to impose on some of the people some of the time. The temptations to which I refer here are those of a man who really knows how to awaken the latent power in words.

For what is a word? A word is a cell stored with the power of innumerable dead personalities. And one who knows how to awaken this power is in real peril of being subdued by it. Instead of saying what he had the intention to say, instead of keeping true to his initial impulse, he is saying something else, reviving in quaint combination many fragments of the thoughts of others. Instead of giving an incarnation of himself in words, he is conjuring up the ghosts of many dead personalities. The effect may be seductive, but it is not, I think, true style. Such effects are to be found, I believe, in Pater, in Rossetti, and in far greater degree in the French and other writers of the decadent school. Indulgence in this sort of luxurious dallying with words is a sure sign of decay, and is to be met with in all literatures during the period of their decline.

Now that I am done with my four propositions, it may seem reasonable that I should bring the matter to a focus by giving a definition of style. Well, I have a dread of definitions. In matters of art it has always seemed to me that the peace found in a definition by the stickler for scientific exactness is a peace of desolation. Nevertheless I may offer this one by Walter Raleigh: "Style is the intrusion of the artist's personality on lifeless matter and impersonal truth." By intrusion he means making itself felt, and the word does not imply making itself felt in an uncalled for way; that would be obtrusion. The definition is not accurate, but it is suggestive and it is presentable.

By way of corollary, I may name too dangers that we of the present time are particularly exposed to—the danger of a too great fastidiousness and the danger of a meretricious attempt at effect. The first is the bane of the scholar, the second of the journalist. What has been very aptly called the "blight of fastidiousness" is less of a danger in America than in England and the older countries, where the scholarly study of

the minuter effects of words is more of a cult. The great type of this class is, of course, the French writer, Gustave Flaubert, but there are a good many young men who profess themselves his disciples. These men can never finish anything, because they are in constant dread that it will not be perfect. They correspond to those people of morbid morality who are afraid to do anything for fear that they will act with wrong motives. Mr. Huneker has a story of a man of this type. He, like his model Flaubert, was a martyr to style. He was supposed by his friends to be composing a work of flawless style, and when he died, they searched eagerly among his papers. They found a bulky manuscript entitled "The Corridor of Time, a novel." "On the first page was written, 'And the insistent clamor of her name at my heart is as the sonorous roll of the sea on a savage shore.' That was all. The other pages were virginal of ink." His cult of style had paralyzed him completely.

The second danger, the meretricious attempt at effect, is the peculiar danger of smart American journalism. In many parts of America, the galvanized style is much in vogue. The jaded public must be stimulated, and the writer seeks to do it by charging his words with a fictitious life. There are, of course, various degrees of this damning sin, but one of the best places to find it characteristically illustrated is in the dramatic criticisms of the New York papers. Here, for instance, is a paragraph from the *Sun*:

"Of late years, in the springtime, the Norwegian dramatist has become the victim of the debutante's unholy longings. It was not springlike in the open air yesterday; nevertheless, the one unfailing vernal harbinger was at hand: a new Nora Helmer who could not act the rôle."

In order to find a still lower depth I bought a copy of the *New York Journal*, and turning to the dramatic column found what I was looking for. Here is an extract from an account of a suburban performance of "Parsifal." At first glance it will certainly seem a parody. But if one has a little familiarity with this class of journalistic writing, he will know that it is meant to be "smart" writing:

"Down went the lights. A chirrup oozed from the ladies.

Black was the theatre : eager was the orchestra, and out pealed gallons of the Wagnerian music. As Payton's 'Parsifal' was merely a 'drama' and not an opera, there was music galore 'ahead of the show,' just to create atmosphere. For a quarter of an hour the orchestra worked hard. A blond youth with a Flatbush avenue face worked it. The audience sat silent, but depressed. Then curtains of rich black velours were parted, and you saw 'a forest near a lake.' It might have been any old forest, near any old lake. It might even have been the road to Hunter's Point and Erie Basin."

Let that speak for the end to which the galvanized style of smart journalism leads.

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